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As this column warned March 1, a military coup in Sudan against the erratic regime of the now-deposed president, Gaafar Nimeiri, had been brewing for some time in the Sudanese officer corps.

But the sudden decision of the defense minister, Gen. Abdel Rahman Swareddahab, to take over the government last Saturday was more than an opportunistic move to take advantage of Mr. Nimeiri's temporary absence in Washington on an official visit.

Although the disciplined demonstrations of doctors and lawyers in the streets of Khartoum and a spreading general strike set the

Critical issues confront junta

stage for the army takeover, the four generals who formed the original junta acted only when they finally realized that junior officers were planning a coup from below.

As Reagan officials now see it, Gen. Swareddahab and his top officers ousted Mr. Nimeiri to preserve the unity of the armed forces under moderate leadership and pre-empt a potentially more radical overthrow. In this highly volatile situation, Gen. Swareddahab has survived his first test by using a mixture of threats and promises to persuade union leaders to end the general strike.

In retrospect, Reagan officials admit that Mr. Nimeiri's cat-like ability to survive so many past coup attempts led them to misjudge the staying power of his regime and to overestimate his capacity to absorb the severe austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

A staunch ally of Egypt and the United States in an area critical to the defense of American interests, Mr. Nimeiri nevertheless, through his increasingly erratic behavior and repressive policies, left his successors an Augean stable of accumulated trouble.

The 15-man military council that has taken responsibility for governing the Sudan faces a series of daunting problems, and few of them seem capable of solution without the assistance of the United States. For example, the new junta is desperately dependent this year on the promised

tons of American food aid to feed hundreds of thousands of starving Sudanese and drought-stricken Ethiopian refugees.

Since the moderate military council seems to offer the best hope of a Western-leaning regime in a critically strategic territory, State Department officers are inclined to be as forthcoming as possible in helping the new government to pay for essential imports and to meet interest payments on a \$9 billion foreign debt.

Although Col. Muammar Qaddafi was first to take credit, on the Libyan

radio, for the overthrow of Mr. Nimeiri and to telephone his congratulations to the new leaders, there is no hard evidence of effective Libyan influence on Gen. Swareddahab, who was careful in his first public statements to mention Egypt as Sudan's particular friend and ally.

Predictably, the worst trouble the generals have to face is the civil war in the South that Mr. Nimeiri was personally responsible for re-igniting. After ending 17 years of

civil strife in 1972 with a generous compromise between the 70 percent Moslem north and the 30 percent black Christian and animist south, Mr. Nimeiri undid his own good work in 1983 by splitting the southern autonomous region and by trying to impose Islamic law.

The southern revolt, led by American-educated Col. John Garang and his Sudanese People's Liberation Army, now has reached the point where the new governing

council in Khartoum admits in its own intelligence assessments that it is impossible to stamp out the insurgency by force.

Realizing that a settlement that fully recognizes southern autonomy is now essential to peace and to the flow of oil from the extensive southern oil fields, Gen. Swareddahab has made it clear that he is anxious for compromise and reconciliation with the South.

However, Col. Garang answered this week with a blistering communique that called for Gen. Swareddahab's regime to turn over power to civilians within seven days or face

renewed attack. Dismissing the new military council as "the Second Republic of Nimeiri," Col. Garang is calling for continuing strikes by workers and is obviously trying to provoke the more radical coup that was aborted by Gen. Swareddahab's pre-emptive action.

Since Col. Garang's SPLA has been dependent on Ethiopian supply lines and Libyan money, this initial reaction was not unexpected. If and when the southern leaders realize that Gen. Swareddahab's government is stable and genuinely conciliatory, there will be another chance to end the civil war. And discreet American official involvement may be essential to success.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.